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BOOK REVIEWS

MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF JEAN ANTOINE HOUDON. BY CHARLES HENRY HART AND EDWARD BIDDLE. Royal square octavo, blue buckram, uncut, 354 pages, with 30 photogravure illustrations and 3 half-tones. Limited edition of 250 copies, printed by the De Vinne Press, New York. Price \$20.00.

As the authors of this handsome and appreciative work say, it seems a little strange that justice to the talent of Houdon should finally come not from the land of his birth, but from that land across the sea which at the time of his memorable visit was little more than a howling wilderness. That such is the case, however, goes perhaps to prove us less barbarians than we are sometimes declared. Whatever may be said derogatory to American taste it should always be remembered that in America and by Americans the genius of Houdon and Barye; the modern Dutch genre painters, Israels, Mauve, Neuhuys, and the painters of the Barbizon school, found early and just appreciation.

Beginning with the date of his birth—Versailles, March 20, 1741—these memoirs give a remarkably complete record of the life of Jean Antoine Houdon until its close in 1828. It is a monumental work not only of biographical, but historical, import. Of its authority there can be no question, for research has been made and facts have been established with the utmost thoroughness and care. In this way certain mooted points are not only touched upon, but apparently definitely fixed—such, for instance, as the incorrect attribution of the Biron bust of John Paul Jones and of one of the busts of Franklin.

The training Houdon passed through in preparation for his artistic career is interestingly described, and an excellent picture is drawn of contemporary life in relating incidents marking epochs in his professional progress. Of special interest to Americans are the chapters referring to the making of the bust of John Paul Jones and the portrait statue of Washington. Some significant sidelights are thrown upon not only the personality

and appearance of the intrepid naval hero, but upon the identification of the body exhumed in France and recently re-interred at Annapolis as his mortal remains.

In describing the negotiations which led to the commission for the portrait of Washington, certain letters from Jefferson, then in Paris and by whom the arrangements were made, are given in full. They are extremely significant, showing that exceptional breadth of mind and culture which invariably appraises art at its true value. In one of these letters occurs the following sentence which might well be noted by all public memorial and statue commissions, "We shall regulate the article of expense as economically as we can with justice to the wishes of the world."

That Houdon was easily "the first sculptor of his day" all will agree, but when the authors of this book suggest that perhaps he was the greatest of all time, a question is bound to be raised. Before him came Michelangelo, and since his career has ended have come Saint Gaudens and Rodin. This work is, however, as previously stated, biographical and historical rather than critical. The authors in most instances wisely take Houdon's rank and merit as an artist for granted as established beyond doubt. Indeed, the highest tribute paid to his art is a quotation from an article by James Barnes, published in the *Appleton's Magazine* of June, 1906. It refers to the bust of John Paul Jones and is so acute and sympathetic that it may well be repeated. "The character and the individuality of the Commander of the 'Bonhomme Richard' are portrayed," Mr. Barnes says, "in so wonderful and life-like a manner that, as we study it, we feel a personal contact with him. Here is the greatest fighting face that has ever been perpetuated in marble, bronze or clay. Yet the determined, bulldog expression is relieved by the suggestion of strong mentality and humor, and, strange to say, the features have, when taken as a whole, an effect of grace and beauty, and more—they have the charm of a remarkable personality."